

Childhood in "Paddy Clarke"

The novel is the story of one young boy's growing up in Ireland in the 1960's. "Barrytown" is a close, Roman Catholic community. We see a number of aspects of what children get up to, what they think and feel and how they treat each other in Paddy's tales. (Paddy is about 10 years old in the stories).

1. Imagination: the boys spend most of their time playing games together. They show imagination in creating little fantasy worlds- eg the viking burial of the rat; dressing up and playing cowboys and indians; making up the Zentoga ritual; pretending to be lepers.

2. Mischief/ Adventure: the boys get up to a lot of dubious exploits, often annoying adults- eg the race over neighbours' hedges, stealing things for kicks like women's magazines they do not even want (p.160), trespassing on the building site, despite, or because of its being dangerous and forbidden. Much of this is done for thrills or excitement, which they get from the danger of being caught.

3. Comradeship: the boys feel a need to belong- they have a gang, with Kevin as leader, and Paddy, Liam, Aidan and James O'Keefe as members. They constantly have to prove themselves to each other by means of dares and being part of group activities- even the outsider David Geraghty has to do as he is told by hitting Paddy at the end (p.279). Only Charles Leavy does not feel the pressure to conform. They are territorial- they have their own area and terrorise other children who trespass on it (eg, they torture the boy they catch when playing cowboys and indians- p.151). Paddy feels isolated as he drifts apart from the rest of the gang at the end- Kevin and the others turn against him.

4. Cruelty: the boys are constantly cruel and vicious towards each other, both verbally and physically, as it is weak to show softer feelings- eg, setting fire to lighter fluid in Sinbad's mouth; Paddy flicking suds into Sinbad's eyes (p.178); boys giving the captured boy a dead leg (p.151); Kevin reminding Liam of his dead mother (p.131) and reminding Paddy his da has left (p.281). Are also cruel to animals- Paddy kills rat (p.72) and hitting dog (p.143). See p.225 for list of the kinds of cruelties kids carry out.

5. Simple Beliefs: children take what they are told at face value without questioning. Paddy recites childish folk wisdom he has picked up, believing it- eg, the penalties in hell for robbing from shops (p.85); believes autograph in football book is George Best's because Da says so; believes rumour that Uncle Eddie was killed; little saying like "if you cut your toe, you get polio" (p.19) are recited.

As he grows, Paddy becomes more aware and learns the truth about some of these things- Uncle Eddie is still alive; George Best's signature is just printed.

6. Laughter- the boys do not take much of the larger issues of life seriously, apart from immediate fear of being picked on by Henno, their teacher. Treat

issues like death light-heartedly- Paddy thinks it would be "brilliant" to have a dead Ma like Liam and Aidan and admires the careless parenthood of Mr O'Connell; they enjoy teasing each other- eg over the nurse's medical inspection; tell jokes- eg Confucius' saying (p.125) and Paddy's shared jokes with Da; messing about and joking in the school film show (p.70), all part of childish game-playing.

As Paddy develops during his family's domestic problems, he laughs less and takes problems of life more seriously.

7. Learning: discover life through experience, often the hard, painful way, and through parental guidance and what they are taught at school- see separate handout on theme of learning.

8. Children's view of world: the boys treat Barrytown as their personal playground and the extent of their world (apart from the odd outing)- "We owned Barrytown...It was a country." (p.150). As they get older, this area shrinks both metaphorically and literally as new buildings eat up the countryside, giving them less and less space to play.

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